PUNCH

The Immortal Liar

BY

CONRAD AIKEN

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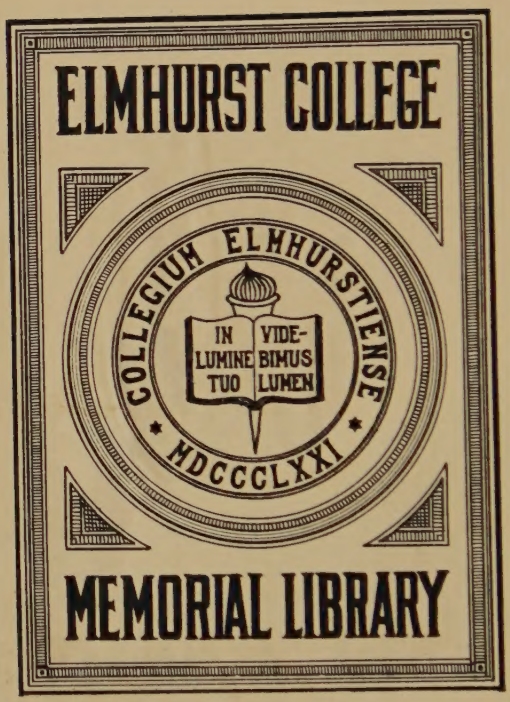
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PUNCH: THE IMMORTAL LIAR

BOOKS BY CONRAD AIKEN

EARTH TRIUMPHANT

TURNS AND MOVIES

THE JIG OF FORSLIN

NOCTURNE OF REMEMBERED SPRING

THE CHARNEL ROSE

THE HOUSE OF DUST

SCEPTICISMS

PUNCH: THE IMMORTAL LIAR

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PUNCH: THE IMMORTAL LIAR

DOCUMENTS IN HIS HISTORY

Potter

By CONRAD AIKEN

NEW YORK ALFRED · A · KNOPF 1921

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TO JESSIE

CONTENTS

PART I. PUNCH: THE IMMORTAL LIAR

Two Old Men Who Remembered Punch 3

What Punch Told Them 12

What Polly Once Confessed 38

How He Died 44

PART II. MOUNTEBANK CARVES HIS PUPPET OF WOOD

He Conceives His Puppet to be Struggling with a Net 49

He Imagines That His Puppet Has a Dark Dream and Hears Voices 70

EPILOGUE

Mountebank Feels the Strings at His Heart 77

PART I

PUNCH: THE IMMORTAL LIAR

TWO OLD MEN WHO REMEMBERED PUNCH

1

Do I remember Punch? — Listen — I'll tell you.
I am an old man now, but I remember,
I saw him in the flesh. My, my, what flesh! . . .
I can still see him shut his eyes to sing,—
As he did always when he'd drunk too much! . . .
He was the splendidest fool I ever knew.

His great red nose was bent down like an ogre's,
His mouth was wide, he was half-bald, half-grey,
His legs were bandy. . . . Every woman in town
Had slapped his face,— although, to hear him talk,
You'd think he'd kissed them all! He was a coward,
We kicked him, spat upon him, whipped him, cursed him,
And threw him out of doors. . . . And yet, we liked him.

What lies he told! He had a genius for it.
He killed his wife, hopped upon Sheba's knee,
Walked and talked with devils, raped and murdered . . .
Why did we listen to him! . . . Why did we like him! . . .
Well, I don't know. Say rather that we loved him —
There was a something noble about the man.
Somehow, though small, he cast an enormous shadow.

The night before he died, we carried him home.
He stopped to lean on the churchyard wall a moment,
And stared at the tower clock. "Listen!" he said.

"This heart that beats here,— underneath my hand,—
All of the clocks in the world keep time with it!
Even the stars in the sky, the sun and planets,
Measure their time by me! — I am the centre! "
We thrust him into his house. . . . He fell down laughing . . .

Yes, there was something noble about the man.
He was half mad, no doubt, a sneak, a villain:
And yet, somehow, the world seemed greater for him;
Seemed smaller when he died.

2

So that's your story, is it? — Well, here's mine!
Draw close your coats about you, cross yourselves —
And shut the door! There's a queer wind tonight
Howling as if some ghost were riding on it —
Whose ghost, God knows! And what I've got to tell you
Might crack the earth, and set the devil talking.
See the blue lightning twinkle on that window!
Look at the ashes dancing on that hearth!
Old Nick is riding trees, and at this instant —
Don't look! — may have his red eye at the keyhole.
You say: this Punch had something noble in him.
Noble! Good God! Are words to have no meanings?
Christ was a scoundrel then, and thieves are angels!
Noble! There's rain on the window for your answer,
Old Nick's tattoo of talons. Look outside,
You'll see him spurt off like a ball of fire,
You'll hear a peal of laughter, a clap of thunder,
And smoke will sting your eyes. If there was ever
A viler villain walked this fatal earth

Tell me his name! Mischief he was in flesh,
Mischief he left behind him in his seed,
And ruins rotting where he found his pleasure.
You say he lied. You say his crimes were fables.
But were they? Where is Judy? Dead and festering,
With a gravestone fallen down above her carrion.
Tell me,— what woman was there in this village
He didn't try to kiss? Not one, you know it;
And if he failed that wasn't his fault, surely.
Who'll put his beer down, now, and swear on the Bible
He ever knew a good deed done by Punch? . . .
Ah! there's rain on the window for your answer.

Now, then,— you'll say, perhaps, I'm superstitious.
But am I? . . . Have I ever looked for signs? . . .
You know me; and you know I'm no old woman
Who squints in a cup of tea-leaves for a portent.
But this I swear, and this I'll swear till doomsday,—
More things go on about us on this earth
Than flesh can know of. Trees have devils in them,
Ghosts go walking out on the waves of the air
And sing in the belfry when the bells are tolling.
What else are owls and bats but evil spirits —
Why do they haunt the churchyard if they're not?
No, I'm not superstitious, more than any
Who use their senses; but I'll tell you this;
The man we knew as Punch was no mere mortal.

Who was he? . . . Wait. I'll tell you. But before,
I've got three questions for you you can't answer!
Who saw Punch come to town? Who was his father?
Where did he come from? . . . Ah! You see; he's human,
(Or so you'd say,) yet no one ever knew

Just who he was, or what his business was!
Presto! and here he stood with a purse of money,
Out of a cloud, you might say,— dropped from heaven.
Again I say,— who saw Punch come to town? . . .
One man! One man alone of all this village
Saw how he came. Or did he? That's the question!
Old Crabbe it was — dead now these fifteen years —
And he it was who told me. . . . It was spring,
And Crabbe, who was still a boy, was in the orchard
Beyond the churchyard — Gardy Gleason's orchard.
He climbed the wall that joins the churchyard wall
And skirts the road, and sat there, legs a-dangling,
To peel a stick. Now then, you know that wall —
You've climbed it after Gardy Gleason's apples;
And you, as well as I, know how the road
Dips down without a curve along the valley
A mile and more. . . . Well, Crabbe was whittling there,
And looking down the road. And not a soul
Was in it: he was sure, for he was watching
To see his father's horse come round the turn.
Bare as your hand! A warm spring day, no clouds,
Bees in the apple-blossoms over his head,
And the sun behind his back. He saw his shadow
Slanting across the road, and almost reaching
The other wall; a thin high-shouldered shadow —
And started, as boys will, to fling his arms,
To see the shadow wave. . . . And then, of a sudden,
Without a squeak or sound, another shadow
Slanted across the road and fell on the wall
Beyond his own,— and staid there. . . . Arms in the air,
Young Crabbe went stiff with fright; he turned his head
And saw in the road, alone before him,— Punch!
Punch, with a bag and stick across one shoulder —

And a red grin on his face! . . .

Well — that was queer:
And young Crabbe felt his entrails coiling coldly.
Where had he come from — slid down out of the air? . . .
Popped from the ground? . . . But just as he was thinking
That after all the fellow might have found
The time to steal upon him,— while he waved
His arms and shadows there,— just then he noticed
A thing that made his hair stand up and creep:
The road, of course, was dusty at that season,—
And Punch's boots showed not a speck of dust . . .
This was enough! He slid back over the wall
And took the short-cut home.

So that's the first count.
The fellow suddenly comes to us from nowhere:
Breaks from the air as a fish might breach the sea.
Does flesh do things like that? Not human flesh!
Only the flesh of angels or of devils,
Which, having a look of flesh, yet, lighter than air,
Burns at the touch and blows in a wind like fire;
Or, seen at dusk, takes on a glow like phosphor . . .
He comes to us from nowhere; and he tells us
Of inquisitions, demons, saints, and hangmen.
Who ever heard — in our time — of such things?
Where was this village that he boasted of —
Who ever heard him name it? — And these people;
These constables and Ketches that he murdered
So humorously, to make so sweet a story; —
Where are they buried? . . . Ah,— you say,— he lied.
And so he did. He lied,— when he was drunk,—
Even of Polly Prim, whom we all knew . . .
But what does that prove? Nothing — no, sir, nothing!

For was he always lying? — That's the question! . . .
Consider, then. . . . A mystery comes among us,
Ugly and vile beyond all human knowledge,
A walking vice; he lies, seduces, steals,
Gets roaring drunk, and leads our youth to mischief.
The village reeks with him. Corruption rules us.
Lechery shakes our walls, the women snicker,
The young men brawl. . . . What's this — a sort of angel? . . .
And here are portents, too! . . . A rain like blood,—
And the laundry reddens where it dries on the walls;
Voices are heard; a curious sound of singing
Thrills from the church at night; and in the morning
A pig is dead on the altar with its throat cut.
The same night Janet Crowe has had a vision:
The door breaks in, the Devil comes in roaring
With a huge knife in his hands, seizes her hair,
And drags her screaming. . . . When she wakes she's lying
Naked upon the floor; the door's wide open;
Her right hand's paralysed for three days after . . .
Next Judy's dead, and no one knows just how.
Punch finds her on the kitchen floor, he says,—
Her hair spread out, and poison on her lips.
Well, did she kill herself,— or was she murdered?
Polly, we know, maintains she killed herself —
And Punch says she was murdered. Who was right?
This much we know: we couldn't prove him guilty,
Nor, for that matter, find a trace of poison;
A darkness fell about her; and a silence
Which only owl's or devil's eyes could see through . . .
" Devils! " — Think hard about that word a minute;
Conjure these mysteries and freaks before you,
And then recall how strangely and how often

It sounded from a drunken tongue we knew.
Who was it, in the grass on Mory's hill,
Saw Satan walking there with his tail about him
And Faustus at his side? . . . Who was it told us
How he had stoned this devil and his clerk
And sent them capering mistily in the sunlight
Through buttercup and dogrose? . . . Last,— who was it
Mounted the wind and stepped through time and space
To talk with Sheba, Solomon, even Judas,
And all in fact — remark this well — save Christ?
Ah! Now we're coming to it. You begin
To see the dark conclusion I've been hinting!
And now I'll tell you what at last convinced me.
Draw close your coats about you! Cross yourselves!
Outside the window, there, in the rain and lightning,
Hangs some one else who listens to this story.

I had a dream: I dreamed it three times over.
The first time was the night that Punch lay dying;
The second time, the day we found him dead
With his feet against his door, and buried him;
The third time when a year had passed. I dreamed
A devil stood in the pulpit of our church
With a bible in his hands; his face was red,
His horns were glittering gold, his tail, like a serpent,
Was mooned and striped with colours that waned and waxed,
His teeth were sharp as jewels. There he laughed,
As the bible, fluttering open in his hands,
Turned to an infant's head, which down he dashed . . .
Or was it a rose, which turned on the floor to blood? . . .
We leapt in horror, and ran towards him shouting,
We chased him over the pews and down the stairs,
And into the vault; and there, in the darkest corner

We beat him down with sticks, we stoned and kicked him
And trampled on him, until at last, as snakes do,
He quivered,— only a little,— in seeming death.
We thrust his body, then, with the plashy tail
Wound twice about his belly, into a coffin,
And carried it to the graveyard; it was raining;
And some one cried aloud to us in the darkness
"Bury him now in holy ground; for then
His soul will wither and have no power to harm!"
And this we did. We dug a grave in haste
And tumbled the coffin in, and heaped it over
With mud and stones. The rain lashed down upon us;
And some one cried aloud to us in the darkness
"Drive now a cross of wood in the earth above him
And blast his soul." And so we made a cross
And hammered it into the loosened earth with shovels.
But at the third stroke suddenly came a cry,
The wet earth flashed and opened, the coffin burst,
The devil leapt before us, thumbed his nose,
And laughing, with a low sound like boulders falling
Or far-off thunder, vanished into the rain.
We looked at the grave, and saw the earth heal over
Before our very eyes . . . roots, grass, and all. . . .

Three times I dreamed this dream; — and from the third,
Waking in time, on such a night as this
With large rain plashing on the walls and windows
And the chimney gulping wind, I suddenly saw
The meaning of my dream; I pulled my clothes on
And took my spade and lantern and went out
Into the darkness. Rain and clouds like smoke
Flew past the lantern; dark were all the houses;
The broken weather-vane on the church was clinking,

The churchyard gate groaned loudly as it opened,
And the oak-tree buzzed in the wind. I raised the lantern,
And saw the tall white pyramid of marble
That's next to Punch's grave. By this I set
The lantern down on the grass; and took my spade
And dug. The wet earth cut like cheese. In no time
I'd gone six feet. I held the lantern up
And looked down into the hole — and there was nothing.
Well, then — I thought perhaps I'd been mistaken —:
Dug to one side. I took the spade again
And dug two feet to the right, two feet to the left,—
Then lengthened it. And what I found was — nothing!
No trace! — no trace of coffin or of bones!
Only the rainy roots . . . I filled the grave
And went back home: and lay awake all night
Thinking about it. When the morning came,—
I don't know what it was got into my head,—
I sneaked back into the churchyard just for luck —
To see if I'd got the sods on straight, and rake
The dirt away. And what do you think I saw?
That grave was just as if I'd never dug there!
Healed over — like the grave I saw in the dream! . . .

Now then, you, over there! you say this Punch
Had something noble in him; tell me, will you —
What kind of a man is this, who comes from nowhere,
Runs through the town like fire, and when he's buried
Skips from the grave, and takes his coffin with him!
Angel or devil, maybe, but no mortal —
Nor angel, either! And I make no riddles.
Believe or not, that's what I saw. You've only
To take a spade, and dig, to prove me wrong. . . .

And it's no sacrilege to dig for devils.

WHAT PUNCH TOLD THEM

Punch in a beer-house, drinking beer,
Booms with his voice so that all may hear,
Bangs on the table with a red-haired fist,
Writhes in his chair with a hump-backed twist,
Leers at his huge nose, in the glass,
And then proclaims, in a voice of brass:
Let all who would prosper and be free
Mark my words and listen to me!
Call me a hunchback? call me a clown?
I turned the universe upside down!
And where is the law or love or chain
That can't be broken by nerve or brain?

Of all my troubles-my-wife was first!
If once I loved her, at last I cursed!
I stole her out of her father's house,
Kissed her, made her my lawful spouse,—
And loved her, too, for a certain season . . .
And where's the woman who loves in reason?
She dogged me up; she dogged me down;
She tracked my footsteps through the town;
Kissed me, clung to me; asked for more;
'Punch, do you love me?'— till I swore
I'd break her neck! I'd fling her away!
Or sail to a foreign land and stay . . .
You've all got wives — now listen to me,
Learn how a man can go scot free!

Did I slit her gorge with a carving-knife —
Offer the hangman's noose my life?
Not Punch! — There are ways and ways to kill,—
Some take courage and some take skill . . .
Poor Judy's dead — and the constables think
She fell downstairs — but here, I wink!
Yes, sirs, there's ways and ways of dying,
Some with wailing and some with crying;
But some of us die in the dead of night
With never a sound in the candlelight.
They stretched her out in a coffin small,
They hid the coffin under a pall,
And the mourners came all dressed in black,
Shouldered it, each with bending back,
And carried it out. . . . I sat apart
And wiped my eyes and broke my heart —
Oh, yes! and each 'Poor Punch!' he said
As he saw me weep and bow my head.

Well, sirs, it may seem strange to you
But I was sad, for a day or two —
I thought of Judy and all she'd been,
How young she was, and then my sin
Came in a nightmare to my brain
And shook my hand with a palsy pain.
Superstition be damned! said I —
There's no use moping — we all must die —
And what does it matter how it's done?
Weep in roses, or hang in fun!
And so it happened, and not long after,
Strutting around with a crooked laughter,
I met this girl named Polly Prim,
Dark and devilish, red-lipped, slim,

A virgin harlot, the fame of the place,
Because no man had kissed her face.
Now I'm not handsome, as you can see,
But I've a power with girls in me —
I take no credit, it's something given,
Sent to the womb by hell or heaven —
A trick, a knack, a stab of the eye,
A twist of the lip, malicious, sly,
Soft in persuasion, bold in the act —
No nut's so hard that it can't be cracked!
You wouldn't think, with a nose like mine,
Purple and gorgeous with too much wine,
And a bony hump like a pedlar's pack
Pushing the coat up off my back,
You wouldn't think that a man like this,
Short of murder, could steal a kiss . . .
And yet I swear, by the devil's dame,
There's many a girl I've called by name,
And when I called, by gad, she came!

This Polly, well, she was like them all —
Ripe red fruit and ready to fall;
Love her — me? God bless you, no!
But nevertheless I told her so —
I smiled to her — whispered, in the street,
Two words — enough! we arranged to meet
At the willow tree by the churchyard wall
As soon as the proper dark should fall.
Well, I was late — I kept her waiting —
Nothing better than a bit of baiting —
And she was vexed and started to go.
'Polly,' said I, 'I love you so!
You won't desert me,— now we've started,—

And leave your poor Punch broken-hearted? . . .
Now look! By Judy's green grave there
There's none so pretty as you, I swear! '—
At this she trembled and clung to me
And rose tip-toe by the wall, to see
Where Judy's grave was . . . Meanwhile I
Pretended, furtive, to wipe my eye.
' Poor Punch! ' she sighed, ' your Judy's dead . . .
Did you love her much? ' I shook my head.
' Not half as much as you,' I said . . .
' Why do you cry, then? ' ' Because I'm lonely.
Polly I love you, love you only.'
At this she frowned. ' No doubt,' said she,
' You said to her what you say to me.'
She took two steps toward the town,—
I caught her backward by her gown;
And what do you think I told her then?
Oh, there's no limit to the wit of men!
I told her straight if she'd be brave,
I'd prove my love by Judy's grave.
She looked at me with a sudden scare.
' Come to the grave — I'll kiss you there! '

The night was thick. No moon there was.
The wind made whickerings in the grass.
The willows tapped at the churchyard wall
And we saw, like ghosts, the dead leaves fall.
' What's that? ' said Polly. ' Dead leaves! ' said I.
Close to our heads a bat whizzed by.
She clung to my arm, her hand was weak,
She opened her lips but could not speak.
I stooped and caught her under the knees
And lifted her up, as light as you please,

Over the wall; but just as I climbed
To the cold stone top the church clock chimed,
Then boomed the hour with a thunder-sound:
And a gravestone keeled with a clap to the ground . . .
Well, I'm not easily scared, but that,
Take my word for it, knocked me flat!
I've danced at murders, laughed at duels —
But at this my sweat rolled off in jewels!
Polly looked up at the starless sky
And covered her face and began to cry;
She leaned against me and clung and trembled;
But I, though scared, of course dissembled,—
I took her arm, and led her then
Over the weed-wet tombs of men.
Once, we stumbled upon a spade —
Thrust in the earth by a vault new-made;
Once, in the dark, I heard her moan
As she touched with her hand a dew-cold stone.
But we came to Judy's grave, and there
I kissed her eyelids, loosed her hair,
Swore there was no such thing as sin,—
And she, being frightened, soon gave in.
You know I'm honest; I won't pretend
That I wasn't scared, nor recommend,—
At least not wholly, to all,— such fashion
For most enjoying an evening's passion.
For more than once, at the wail in the trees,
The heart in my body seemed to freeze;
And I half expected,— bless my eyes! —
To see a ghost from the cold grass rise.

So much for Polly. I here pass over
The days that followed,— days of clover!

But all things end, and the trouble came
When Polly died,— with me to blame.
There lived a constable in that town,
An insolent bully, a red-necked clown,
With small pig's eyes and stupid face,
A fool, the laughing-stock of the place.
He hated me, as I did him,
Because he loved this Polly Prim . . .
Why does the good Lord make such fellows?
He rolled his head and blew like a bellows
Whenever, as often, he chanced to see,
On a clear evening, Polly and me
Walking together along the lane:
Upon my honour, it gave him pain! . . .
And once, one evening, as we lay
With much to do and little to say
In deep grass by the churchyard wall,—
We suddenly heard a pebble fall;
And there he crept in the darkness, groping
From stone to stone with loud steps, hoping
To catch us out . . . How still we kept!
This way and that in the dark he stept,
Heavily breathing, bending, peering;
And when at last he was out of hearing,
Lord how we laughed; and how like flame
Our kisses after that fright became! —
Well, on the night that Polly died,
I sat in the inn, alone. Outside
The rain came down in glassy sheets,
I heard it sing and seethe in the streets,
Green lightning through the windows flashed,
Thunder along the treetops crashed,
A shrill wind whistled; and once it seemed

I heard through the wind a voice that screamed . . .
I knew right well that Pol was dying,
I stopped my ears, but still that crying
Rang like a nightmare through my brain.
Then all at once, through the window-pane,
I saw this constable's white face stare,
Stare and vanish. I left my chair,
My flesh turned cold, for I knew well
The news the constable came to tell:
I knew, as well as that light is light,
Murder had come to town that night.
The door flew open: in he came,
With his mouth like wax and his eyes like flame.
'Good evening, officer,' then said I:
'Is it raining still?' — There was no reply,—
For a breath or two; and then he said
'I suppose you know your whore is dead?'—
He stared at me: I stared at him . . .
'I suppose you allude to — Polly Prim?'
'Allude? You know damned well I do.'
'A whore is a whore. What's that to you?'
'You know damned well what it is to me —
And now you'll settle . . .' A knife flashed free,
Flashed in an arc, I ducked, he lunged,
Down to the floor like an ox he plunged
With me on top: I caught his wrist,
Snapped it sharp with a sudden twist,
His fingers loosened, the knife fell out,
I caught the haft up, turned about,
And struck him twice. He gave one moan,
Clutched once,— and then lay still as stone.

Now, this was folly. . . . I'm free to admit

For once — h'm — anger outran my wit.
Murder will out! I was straightway tried
By a jealous judge, and would have died
Had not my cunning returned to me,
At the gallows foot, and set me free.
There was a hangman there, poor wretch,
A morbid soul by the name of Ketch —
Jack Ketch; a corpse with a slow green eye
That only lit when he saw men die.
No sooner was I condemned, than he
Conceived a peculiar joy in me:
Watched me, talked to me; to and fro
Before my window he would go,—
For ever touching, as he spoke,
Hand to gullet, his little joke!
Now, when the day for the hanging fell,
He came to the court outside my cell,
And set up, under my very eyes,
The gallows! . . . Well, sirs, being wise,
And having pretended, many days,
To be a fool, I began to praise . . .
'Oh, what a pretty tree!' said I,
And clapped my hands. He rolled one eye
With a dubious tilt toward me then
And grinned, and slouched away again.
Back he came, in a whisper's time,
With rope and ladder, and started to climb
To the gallows-top. At this I ran
To the small cell-window, and began
To cry 'Stop, thief! — There's a thief out here!
Robbing the fruit-tree!' — shrill and clear
I sang this out: Jack Ketch spun round
And stared at me with never a sound . . .

He looked at me with a pitying look,
Then once or twice his head he shook,
Tapped his forehead, tied up his noose,
Leaving it swinging large and loose,
Climbed down, and sauntered off once more . . .
This time, when he came back, he bore,
(He and the sheriff, on their heads,)
A coffin, all lapped round with leads . . .
'Aha!' I cried, with a knowing air;
'The thieves have fetched a basket there!'—
Down thy dropped it upon the stones—
Thump! and a shudder thrilled my bones.

Ketch came to me. 'Now, Punch, step out!'
'Oh, no!' cried I: 'What's this about?'
'Come out, sir, and be hanged!' said he,—
'A pretty fruit for a pretty tree!'—
'Hanged on a tree—what's that?' said I.
'Hanged by the neck until you die!'
At this I wept and beat the stones,
A mortal terror froze my bones;
I cried aloud as I was led
To the gallows foot, already dead . . .
Jack Ketch began to shine with glee.
—'Put up your pretty head!' said he—
'Inside the noose!'—I began to quake,
The rope came dangling like a snake,
I touched it, shivered, touched again,
And took it in my hands, and then,—
Once more pretending lack of wit,—
Thrust up my head—outside of it . . .
'Oh, no!' said Ketch—'inside, inside!'
'Inside of what?'—Again I tried,

And failed again. At this he swore.
'Now, Punch, watch me, and try once more!'
He held the noose above his crown
And then with his two hands dropped it down,—
And quick as a wink I hauled him high,
Hauled him dangling against the sky,
Knocked down the sheriff, turned and ran,
Once more a free and happy man!

Oh, Lord, oh, Lord, what things I've done!
What tricks have played, what devil's fun!
With many a death my hands are red;
Many a heart for me has bled;
Many a tear has fallen for me
From woman's golden praying-tree!
I will not say I've not at times
Fled from the darkness of my crimes:
Sometimes with sin and sickness faint,
On my poor knees before some saint,
I've wept the blackness of my heart
And vowed a better life to start . . .
Yet I confess each saint was human,
Some not too proud or holy woman,—
And not too proud for earthly blisses,
Laughter, and moonlight sport, and kisses! —
What girls have held their hands to me!
What mouths to touch, what eyes to see!
Yet something's in me, something strange,
That drives me on to seek for change;
I love for a little and not for long —
And walk my ways then with a song.
Some hold — and I will not deny —
It's not of a mortal birth am I:

I wailed not from a woman's womb,
Nor am I destined for the tomb . . .
Some hold, who've known the things I've done,
I am the devil's only son . . .
But this I doubt . . . For once I saw
Old Nick himself with tail and claw,
On a green hillside in the dusk
Where the wild roses were in musk.
With Doctor Faustus by him there,—
Bearing a black book, pale as care,—
He paced the grass; his eyes were coal;
He sought to snare my immortal soul.

It was, I say, as evening fell.
The sky was green. A silver bell
Sang in the vale, and all fell still
As Satan smoked across that hill.
I lay in the grass and sucked a straw
And schemed how I might thwart the law,
When suddenly, lifting up my eyes,
I saw him red against the skies.
Lord, what a start it gave to me!
'Good evening, Mr. Punch!' said he . . .
And at those words, like whips of flame,
A dark cloud on that hillside came,
The shapes of rocks began to change,
The trees seemed sinister and strange,
They stirred upon their stems, and eyes
Peered out from under leaves, and cries
Flew bodiless upon that air
In angry jargon everywhere;
And though I looked a long while down
I saw no valley, saw no town.

Old Nick himself was nowhere then,
Although I heard his voice again
Out of the dark in swollen tones
Like fall of subterranean stones:
'Consider well what you shall see
And make your bargain here with me!'—
Then Faustus, with a hand that shook,
Turned the great pages of his book,
As if he turned the stars; and first
A flood of light around me burst;
And in a valley by a sea
Bound by invisible veins to me
All in the twinkling of an eye
A town went glistening towards the sky,
With walls and towers and clustered trees
And swarms of men there thick as bees . . .
Then Faustus, tremulous with great age
Turned like a sheaf of sky that page,—
Valley and sea were rolled away . . .
I saw myself, at the end of day,
Climb up a peaked and verdant hill
Beside the twinklings of a rill;
And there a rock I saw; and there
A voice was heard upon that air
Saying, 'Smite once!' and in my hand
There grew, as out of the air, a wand,
And once I smote. And straight there came
Out of the rock a crimson flame,
And out of the flame, naked and fair,
Venus herself, with golden hair.
Upon white daisies there she stepped
And first she shivered, and then she wept,
And then through her hair she smiled at me,

And sidelong came; but suddenly
Like time itself that luminous page
Flashed, and I saw that archimage
Spread out his ancient hands, and look
Grimacing upward from his book.
'You see now, Mr. Punch,' he said,
'What power we hold. Even the dead
Rise upward through the trammelled grass
If we command. All comes to pass,
As we desire! '—'Then let me see,'
Said I, 'if such a thing can be! '—
He turned his huge page once again . . .
And now I saw a level plain
Far as the eye could see, and there
Were graves and tombstones everywhere.
And all those graves and tombs were still,
Motionless as the dead, until
There rose, as out of the earth, a cry
Wavering slowly to the sky;
And suddenly then, but without sound,
Those stones fell softly to the ground,
Millions of tombs divulged their dead . . .
With clapping arm and pallid head
Against a sky of sunset flame
Out of the trammelled grass they came,
Stirred like a forest in the wind,
Flourished their bones, till, somehow thinned,
They seemed to blow along that sky
Like hosts of withered leaves, that fly
Before a stream of air; and then
Dwindled, fell down, lay still again . . .
Then Faustus said: "The time has come:
Sign here your name, set here your thumb!

All power will Satan give to you
If, dying, you will repay the due."
'My soul, you mean?'—'I mean your soul!'
'Then may my heart turn black as coal
Before I serve, eternally,
Any such tyrant fiend as he!'—
At this a roiling cloud of smoke
Burst from the grass, and Satan spoke
And burned before me on that hill.
'Surrender now,' he cried, 'your will!'
I reached to earth, and seized a stone,
And flung it straight; and, all alone,
Saw how he melted in that air
With ancient Faustus by him there;
Before it struck I saw him pass;
The stone fell softly to the grass . . .
And there in the grass I sucked a straw
And schemed how I might thwart the law.

What is it, in a woman's skin,
So surely drives a man to sin?
What is it, in a woman's eyes,
No sooner laughed in than it dies? . . .
The loveliest lady in that town
Was she, who wore a green silk gown,
The baker's wife, a haughty dame,—
And it was sweet to bring her shame!
The first time, when I smiled at her,
She curled her lip and did not stir . . .
The second time, she gleamed at me
Through narrowed eyes, amusedly.
The third time — she went quickly by,
But there was laughter in her eye.

I turned to look and she turned too —
And she was surely mine I knew.
The fourth, I met her by a stream
Reading a book, but half in dream:
It was an afternoon in spring —
We might have heard the blackbird sing.
She talked uneasily, laughed at me,
Picked up her book, but let me see
She more than liked to have me there:
And dropped her book and primped her hair.
I leaned and caught one fingertip,
Playfully squeezed it, let it slip
Into the grass again . . . We lay
And breathed and smiled, no word to say.
The fifth — I met her late at night.
Her eyes were dark in lantern-light.
I caught her arm and pressed it twice
And felt her hand as cold as ice . . .
'Pauline, come out to walk with me!'
She shook her head. 'Oh, no!' said she —
Her opened lips were grey with pain,
Backward and forward along the lane
She looked, afraid lest we be seen.
'Oh, no!' said she — but did she mean
No with her voice, yes with her heart? . . .
I took her hand as if to start
And suddenly she began to cry,—
Yet came with me . . . 'Pauline,' said I,
'Lift up your mouth!' Once more, at this,
She shook her head . . . yet took my kiss,
Shut both her eyes, clung hard to me,
And closer leaned with breast and knee . . .
Above black trees the moon swam high

And small white clouds were in the sky;
The lilac-heads were sweet; we crept
Past houses where the good folk slept
Into a garden; a silver light
Flared through the trees, and dimly bright
Were pool and grass and garden walk;
And there we sat to kiss and talk;
And there, beneath that poplar tree,
She gave her trembling heart to me . . .
The sixth, by all odds, was the best —
By this her conscience was at rest;
She smiled at me as if to say
'Do not persuade,— but have your way.'
It was a sun-stilled afternoon,
The brook flashed fire. A sliver of moon
Seemed, like an icy ghost, to melt
In warm blue sky . . . Her heart I felt
Thumping beneath my palm. We stayed
A sweet while there in the poplar shade:
She told her secrets, every one,
And of her husband we made fun.
The seventh — she began to cling,—
And fiddled with her wedding ring . . .
'O! we were monstrous sinners both,
And we should part!' But she was loth
To come to this; so clung to me
Almost, perhaps, too tenderly . . .
The eighth and ninth — my joy was mixed.
Our kisses over, straight she fixed
Her blue eyes on my heart, to say,
Since I had led her so astray,
And made her loathe her husband — why,
If I should leave her she would die!

At this, you'll easily conceive,
My one wish was, of course, to leave . . .
And though I kissed her, stroked her, smiled,
Tickled her chin, and called her 'child,'
Sidelong she peered askance at me,
Her eyes grew dark,—and she could see
Plainly as pebbles in the brook
The secret thoughts beneath my look.
'What are you thinking, girl?' I said,—
Sharply she turned away her head,
Compressed her lips, was still a space
Put up one hand against her face,—
And then in a queer tone, forced and low,
Said, 'Nothing — only, it's time to go.'
And then cold fury rose in me
And we walked homeward silently.

Well, sirs, it was that very night,
Brooding alone by candlelight,
My queerest of all adventures came . . .
I sat and sulked. My thoughts, like flame,
Licked up my memories of Pauline,
Calling her vulgar, plain, obscene,
Coarse-fleshed, a dull and nagging thing,
Conquered only to crawl and cling.
Why do they change? . . . Why lags desire? . . .
Resentment in me like a fire
Roared on the tinsel of those days,
Consumed them all. I walked those ways
By every leaf and stone again,
And every leaf was a leaf of pain,
And every stone lay cold in me
Or fell through depths of agony.

Was there in all this wide world never
One woman I might love for ever?
Or if that miracle could not be,
One woman who might tire of me
Before I tired, and fling me by:
One woman lustrous as the sky,
Girdled with stars, set round with light,
Whose heart was music, whose eyes were night?
Who moved like a sea wave in the wind;
Transfiguring all things when she sinned?
This was absurd— I laughed at this!
What woman would dare refuse my kiss?
What queen, indeed, could tire of me? —
And yet, if such a queen might be . . .
Beautiful, haughty, perilous, wise . . .
What rarer sport, what nobler prize?
At this I must have slept; for when
My puzzled eyes unclosed again
The room seemed darker,— large, and strange;
Even as I looked, it seemed to change;
And as I marvelled, straight I heard
Close to my ears one whispered word —
'Sheba!'— said once. And then I saw
Old Nick himself with tail and claw
Come back again. Beside me there
He marvellously emerged from air
First horns and head, then tail and limb,
Upward, as one might softly swim
From shadowy depths . . . One gleaming hand,
Even before I saw him stand,
Still bodiless, he stretched to me . . .
'So, Punch, you've called my name,' said he,—
'And here I am!'— His dark mouth grinned.

Within those walls was a tempest wind.
The candle guttered. His glowing face
Filled with a ghostly shine that place.
'Listen!' said he . . . and as he spoke
Those walls, no solider than smoke,
Seemed slowly streaming on dark air . . .
'There is one woman wise and fair,
More marvellous than her you dream.
This is my bargain — this my scheme.
You shall be borne through time and space
To feed your soul upon this face:
If you can win her you are free;
But if you fail,— you come to me!'—
My heart beat loudly. 'Done!' said I . . .
From all the elements rose a cry,
Water and fire and wind and earth
Joined in a frenzied scream of mirth.
Punch or the Devil — they should see
Which was the better man to be! . . .

All in the twinkling of his eye
I crossed blue seas of whistling sky.
The clamor died behind me. Soon
By Sheba's gate, under a moon,—
Against which palm-trees black as jet
Fringed in a giant silhouette,—
Along a path of silver sand
I walked, with stars on either hand.
Beneath the palm-trees fountains spattered,
Luminous fishes flashed and scattered,
Leaving behind them streaks of fire
And bubbles of light. . . . The moon pushed higher,
And through black branches, quick as flame,

Luminous parrots went and came,
And fiery feathers drifted down . . .
Lord, what a place for me, a clown!
I skipped along that path; and there
Flew marvellous music on that air,—
Slow horns and cymbals, and the sound
Of many dancers whirling round.
And then my heart stood still in me:
By the flaming doorway I could see,
Two giants, black as stone, and tall
As pine trees, one by either wall.
Like fiery moons their eyes they rolled;
They roared at me; my brain went cold;
But in between them, nothing daunted,
I capered up those stairs, and flaunted,
Wagging the hump upon my back,
Into the court . . . Lord, what a pack
Of men and women jostled there!
Sheba sat in a golden chair
Set high upon a glittering throne
Of jewelled and silvered ivory-bone.
A fan of peacocks' feathers waved
Before her eyes. The floor was paved
With golden moons and stars of blue;
Vermilion birds about her flew;
And out of the air dissolving sweet
Fell music with persuasive beat.
And then I saw how one by one
Great mages filed before that throne,—
Upon their knees went humbly down
Scholar and prince with book and crown;
To all she smiled, denied them all,
Vainly before her did they fall.

The Duke of Lorraine trembled there;
King Solomon, too, with snow-white hair;
Herod the Great hung down his head,
And Virgil, pallid as the dead;
Judas Iscariot, dark of eye,
Pulled at his chin and shuffled by . . .
And last of all that host came I! —
Lord, how I shook! She smiled at me . . .
And in her eyes as in a sea
Of fire and darkness I went down:
In froth of moonlight seemed to drown:
Whirled in a wave of music, spun
In ravelling fiery threads of sun!
Where was I? . . . Was I shivering there? . . .
A roar of laughter smote that air,
The mages shook their sides with glee,
Queens and madmen laughed at me.
Solomon laid his crown aside
And clapped his hands: and Judas cried;
And Heliogabalus sobbed aloud . . .
White anger froze my veins. I bowed
Coldly, to all — and all fell still,
Except one laugh that trailed out shrill
Then died away. 'Great queen!' I said —
And paused. She leaned her golden head,
With one white hand beside her ear:
'Louder!' she said —'I cannot hear!'—
And slowly smiled — and as she smiled
Smaller and foolisher than a child
I seemed. I cleared my voice, and then —
'Great queen!' began,— and once again
Forward she leaned and smiled at me,
In grave and sweet perplexity,

And raised one small hand, crystal-clear,
Once more to touch her jewelled ear.
And then, behind my back, I heard
Laughter subdued, a tittered word,
A stir of mirth . . . I turned and glared,—
Saw solemn faces ill prepared;
Saw twisting mouth and shifting eye.
So Sheba's deafness was a lie!
And quick as a wink I turned, I climbed
Those ivory steps. Clear laughter chimed,
Confusion rose. Beside her throne
I leaned, I roared in a tempest tone
'Sheba, my name is Punch! I stand
With power of darkness in my hand,—
Power to shake your kingdom down,
To crack your heart and break your crown!'
And then as I stood quaking there,
Feeding upon her eyes, her hair,
Amazing drunkenness waved in me:
I gallantly hopped upon her knee,
I kissed her mouth! and straight arose
A clamour of cries, and silence froze,
And Sheba, quivering backward, weak,
Tried once, and twice, and thrice, to speak;
And flushed; and stared; and laughed; and then —
Put up her mouth to kiss again! . . .

At once sweet music thrilled the air!
Heliogabalus tore his hair!
Solomon raged and broke his crown,
Vermilion birds flew singing down,
Horns and cymbals stormed at the wall
And a dancing madness took them all.

All night they danced . . . and all night through
Vermilion parrots clanged and flew . . .
The walls were shaken with song and glee
While Sheba lay and smiled at me.
And through her eyes I went and came
Now like an ice-thing, now like flame,
A thousand times . . . Before us waved
A peacock fan . . . the floor was paved
With golden moons and stars of blue . . .
And dancers danced there, all night through.
And day by day and night by night
I dwelt there in amazed delight,
King of that golden mountain-land
With slaves to bless my least command.
Take this! fetch that! . . . An old guitar,
The blue dust falling from a star,
Pearls for Sheba or wine for me,
Or coral bleeding from the sea,—
No matter what; for quick as a wink
It came, before I'd time to think.
How Sheba smiled! and how she laughed!
And oh, what cups of wine she quaffed,
And how we danced and how we sang,
And how that glittering palace rang
With music under the rosy moon
Of horn and cymbal and bassoon!
Heliogabalus was my slave,
And Judas nightly from his grave
Rose with a sheet about his loins
To dance before us for copper coins,
Weeping, weeping for his sins
To a cheerful tune from violins . . .
Mermaids came with rainbow fins,

Sea-weed-bearded kings of the sea
Showered rich tribute there for me,—
Dead men's treasure of gold and stones
Was swept away before our thrones.
And once — one evening — tired of this,
Yes, tired for once of Sheba's kiss,
Tired of purple and gold, and cries
Of parokeets with crimson eyes,
Musicians beating perpetual drums
And diamonds brushed away like crumbs,
Tired of this, with joy I listened
To a mermaid's voice; her blue eyes glistened,
Cold as the sea were her eyes, and deep,
And walking like one who walks in sleep
I went with her, I followed her down
Great stairs of stone to a royal town
With towers of sea-shell filigree
By glow-worms lit in the gloom of the sea;
And amber walls, and streets of sand . . .
The blue-eyed mermaid took my hand:
Silver dolphins with eyes of flame
Snoring fountains about us came,
Crabs whose backs were pearl-encrusted
And ancient turtles diamond-dusted;
All the dark kingdom came to rout us
And oh! what a dance was danced about us! . . .
Until, at the break of the blue sea-day,
Up coral stairs I hurried away,
Once more to Sheba, the scarlet queen,
Who danced with bells and a tambourine,
Who poured black wine, and sang to me
Till I forgot that queen of the sea. . . .

Well, sirs, all things will come to an end,—
Old Nick, you know, is no man's friend . . .
How long I stayed, I don't know now —;
But back I came,— I don't know how,—
To go my daily rounds again
With red birds darting through my brain . . .
Yes, sirs, there's many a thing I've done —
I've had my fling, I've had my fun:
No man or devil has bested me,—
Clap me in jail, I soon go free!
Even the inquisition came
And marked a cross against my name,
And locked me howling into a prison
Because I denied their Christ had risen!
But did I stay there? . . . Not a bit.
There's always a way for nerve and wit!
A man's wit is a golden key
To open the door and set him free . . .
And Death — how many times I've fought him! —
How many lessons I have taught him!
The first time — I was in my bed:
Naked I fought him, cracked his head,
And drove him, moaning, into the street . . .
Death! Do you think he's hard to beat?
Why once, when I was young and strong,
I chased the varlet all day long,—
Up hill and down, by vale and shore,
And into the sea! It made me roar
To see those lean shanks rise and fall,
To hear him rattle across a wall,—
To hear him crying aloud for breath . . .
Even old Nick is worse than Death! . . .
And want and weariness — well, these too

Will somewhere lie in wait for you;
And sickness like a black dog comes
To whine at the table and beg for crumbs . . .
Yet here you see me — a mortal man:
And what I've conquered,— all men can!

. . . A mortal man . . . Though I'll not say
That some time, after the end of day,
You might not see me, a giant size,
Hurling a shadow aginst the skies . . .
Blotting the stars . . . at one step taking
A hill or a town . . . the whole earth shaking . . .
And I'll not say that the time must come
When Death will find me, and leave me dumb!

WHAT POLLY ONCE CONFESSED

"Since you insist, you fool, why then, I'll tell you . . .
Love Punch? Good Lord! I hope I'm not so silly!
Red-nosed, with hands like hams, humpbacked and bandy,—
And small green rheumy eyes! I'd sooner love
The wildman that they showed us in the circus!
Him with the ring in his nose, and the leaves in his hair,
And the long arms like a gorilla's always dragging!
Love him! . . . Don't make me laugh. I'll crack the mirror.
But since you insist (and I can see you're hungry
As all men are, sooner or later, in love,
To root among my muddy secrets, snuffling
Above them with a leering satisfaction)
Why then, I'll tell you. Hate me if you want to.
The whole thing comes to one word — jealousy! . . .
And I won't say that as I look back on it,
And all that came from it of lies and hatred,
I don't, sometimes, feel fifty kinds of fool . . .
You've heard of jealousy? How wise you are!
Well, then, you know how blind and cruel it is,
How like a cramp it shuts about the heart
And turns the blood to poison, and so sends it
Creeping into the brain for schemes of torture.
Judy and I were jealous — that's the story.
Why were we? God knows! ask me something easy.
We do things, feel things, sometimes, without knowing
The reason why. As far as I remember
I hated Judy — Judy hated me.
At five years old she stuck her tongue out at me;

At ten years old we pulled each other's hair;
At fifteen — well — she stole my sweetheart from me.
We had a way of smiling at each other —
So innocent it seemed, and oh so sweet! —
That had the basilisk beaten to a frazzle.
Look, I can do it still, I've had such practice! —
We lowered our lids —like this —; and smiled — like
this! . . .

So, we grew up. And one fine day this Punch
Came roaring into town, with all his stories
Of women weeping for him, dying for him,
And all the rest. Of course, no one believed him —
No one, that is, but Judy! We all saw
The coward that he was,— a mouse for courage,
Ran if you raised your voice! But Judy, somehow,
(Though, to be sure, she never was too clever)
Believed him: yes, she thought him *so* romantic,
Oh, so unusual! And she lost no time
In setting after him . . . Oh, well, you know
What fools men are — (You're one yourself) — and Punch
Was no exception, rather worse than most:
Crazy for love, went smirking around women
Tongue hanging out, his little eyes revolving
In search of titbits — fawning, leering, sidling;
And knowing this, of course, we laughed at him . . .
So Judy found him easy: though I won't say
She didn't use the few wits God had lent her.
Before he knew it, Punch had been seduced,—
Trussed up and married . . . Gone — another hero!

Now for confession. And it's not so easy
As kissing under aspen leaves in moonlight.
First, as for Punch, I will confess I liked him —

Well, more than half! Repulsive, ugly, bestial,
Coward and sneak — I knew him all these things,
As who could not. But still, there was about him
When he was young, as then he was, some presence,
Some swagger of the flesh, vivid and subtle,
That could not help but make a woman's body
Tingle with secret pleasure. There you have it!
You see us now, girls, spinsters, and old women,
Watching behind our shutters when he passed:
Shuddering with a pleased ecstatic horror
If he should speak to us or smile to us;
And yet, oh, hating him! Sometimes I think
It's not the saint we love men for, but satyr:
The mouth too loose with constant lippish thinking
Of fevered kisses, and the little eyes
Malicious and provocative that smear you
With drivel of desire. It's true we hate him,
Yet hate, sometimes, is not so unlike love:
We try to scorn him out, to laugh him down,
Yet feel our features changing, under his,
To mirror him . . . our mouths grow loose as his,
Corruption thrills the flesh. Unless we shriek
And break the spell, we're one more atom lost
In the terrific maelstrom of the blood.
Punch had the satyr's face, the satyr's body,
The twinkle of shrewd eyes, the wag of the leg,
That stiffens flesh. I hated him — and liked him.
You see then how I felt, when Judy came
And sighed, and smiled, and whisperingly confided
(All to enrage me!) how she'd caught her monster —
Limed the leaves, led him into the chamber . . .
You see then how I laughed and tweaked her ear,
Patted her hand and said 'You clever Judy!'

With furies in my heart: I could have killed her . . .
Poor fool! she might as well have said in words
What with her snaky smile she said so plainly —
'I've beaten you at last!'—

I smiled, of course . . .
But none the less revenge was coiling in me
With watchful eyes. And while the vixen snickered
Secretly there beside me, I was thinking
Already of this satyr, Punch, her husband,
And of her ruin through him. Give me credit!
Oh, give me credit! I am sometimes clever.
I saw the whole thing through from start to finish!
I saw a moonlit garden in my mind,
With Punch there, like a satyr, trampling lilies,
Wallowing among lilac leaves, and snorting,—
Or whining, rather,— his bristly passion for me:
Lifting his great red hands up in the moonlight
Under my window: or coming over the wall
With one leg up, and anguish on his face,
And the moon behind his head — just like a halo!
Fantastic sight! I was already laughing.
The moon herself might well turn red to see it.
And as for Judy — I saw her at her window
Waiting for Punch, alone and cold in the moonlight,
With little hard-fixed eyes distilling poison . . .
Rapture! I almost loved her at that moment.

"Why bore you with details? You need no telling
How women do such things. You know me well,
Know all my tricks, know how I laugh or twitter,
Smile timidly with dark eyes gleaming sidelong,
Let fall my hand,— as if in carelessness,—

Upon your arm; or lean one breast against you
To whisper you some most ingenuous secret!
H'm! . . . Magic! . . . Magic of flesh! You too have felt it
And thrilled to it. You've heard it in the evening
Shaking a devilish music in the darkness
Of passionate thought; bats are abroad in gardens;
The grass is soft to lie on; and the moonlight
Goes over you like hands. Can flesh resist it?
Poor foolish flesh! pour wine for pigs and bears,
Get them so drunk they cannot stand, but squeal
Lying upon their helpless backs, and blinking
At fifteen suns: their drunkenness is nothing
To the helpless lunacy of human flesh
Tipsy with lust. You've seen it crawl and slaver,
You've seen it dance its idiot dance in moonlight
With eyes upturned so imbecile and wistful:
And, oh, what caperings! . . . Well, then, for spite
And little else (except what I've confessed)
You see me, in a green gown, leaning slowly
To play on Punch these delicate fleshly harpings.
You see me dance with him while Judy watches,
Her blue eyes darting hatred among swift dancers,
Following us, in lazy convolutions,
Among the chords and discords . . . You can see
The panic heartbeats in those eyes of hers.
For all their cruelty . . . The girl is frightened . . .
She sees Punch smile at me — in a way she knows!
She sees the twitchings of his hand behind me —
Against my flesh! She sees his eyes turned upward
In an ecstatic misery all too plain . . .
Oh, Lord, those eyes of his! They gave me nightmares.
I almost spoiled the whole thing more than once,
By laughing in his face.

"Well — there's the story.
A few weeks passed and Punch was in my garden
Just as I thought he would be; trampling lilies,
Heaving his crooked shoulder over the wall
Against the moon, wallowing in my lilacs:
While Judy sat afar and waited for him.
Sweet triumph! How I laughed and told the neighbours!
See the red monster eating from my hand!
The wildman come from his cave, his bones and berries,
To waltz on his hindlegs in obedient circles!
I give him a fan to hold, he snuffs and paws it,
Goes home with the perfume on him, passion-draggled,
Grunts my name in his sleep . . . Too sweet a triumph! . . .
For now poor foolish Judy, struck with horror
Failed to come forward fighting — what I hoped for:
Instead, with one scared look, she stepped down backward
Into the dark. I mean, she killed herself.
Not out of love for Punch! Oh, no. I'm certain.
But out of broken pride. Yes, simply that.
And left me feeling, somehow, somewhat foolish.

You see, then, how much truth is in his story —
You see how much I loved him . . . There! I've told you
The whole thing through, for you to sniff and snort on.
Isn't it pretty? . . . Romance, with all its graces!
Go on, be jealous now,— hate Punch! hate me!
Tear out my heart, defile the sacred image
Of Punch that's graven there! . . . And when you're
finished —

How do you like the way I've done my hair? "

HOW HE DIED

When Punch had roared at the inn for days
The walls went round in a ringing haze,
Miriam, through the splendour seen,
Twinkled and smiled like Sheba's Queen,
Jake was the devil himself, the host
Scratched in a book like a solemn Faust;
And the lights like birds went swiftly round
With a soft and feathery whistling sound.
He seized the table with one great hand
And a thousand people helped him stand,
"Good-night!" a thousand voices said,
The words like gongs assailed his head,
And out he reeled, most royally,
Singing, amid that company.—
Luminous clocks above him rolled,
Bells in the darkness heavily tolled,
The stars in the sky were smoothly beating
In a solemn chorus, all repeating
The tick of the great heart in his breast
That tore his body, and would not rest.

Singing, he climbed the elusive street,
And heard far off his footsteps beat;
Singing, they pushed him through the door,
And he fell full length on the darkened floor . . .
But his head struck sharply as he fell
And he heard a sound like a broken bell;
And then, in the half-light of the moon,

The twittering elvish light of June,
A host of folk came round him there,—
Sheba with diamonds in her hair,
Solomon thrumming a psaltery,
Judas Iscariot dark of eye,
Satan and Faustus and Lorraine,
And Heliogabalus with his train . . .
The air was sweet with a delicate sound
Of silk things rustling on the ground,
Jewels and silver twinkled, dim,
Voices and laughter circled him . . .

After a while the clock struck two,
A whisper among the audience flew,
And Judy before him came and knelt
And kissed him; and her lips, he felt,
Were wet with tears . . . She wore a crown,
And amethysts, and a pale green gown . . .
After a while the clock struck three
And Polly beside him, on one knee,
Leaned above him and softly cried,
Wearing a white veil like a bride.
One candle on the sill was burning,
And Faustus sat in the corner, turning
Page after page with solemn care
To count the immortal heartbeats there.
Slow was the heart, and quick the stroke
Of the pen, and never a word he spoke;
But watched the tears of pale wax run
Down from the long flame one by one.
Solomon in the moonlight bowed,
The Queen of Sheba sobbed aloud;
Like a madonna carved in stone

Judy in starlight stood alone:
Tears were glistening on her cheek,
Her lips were awry, she could not speak.
After a while the clock struck four,
And Faustus said "I can write no more:
I've entered the heartbeats, every one,
And now the allotted time is done."
He dipped his pen, made one more mark,
And clapped his book. The room grew dark.
At four o'clock Punch turned his head
And "I forgive you all," he said. . . .

At five o'clock they found him dead.

PART II

MOUNTEBANK CARVES HIS PUPPET OF WOOD

HE CONCEIVES HIS PUPPET TO BE STRUGGLING WITH A NET

I

As evening fell, and Punch crept out of the wood
And saw the valley before him (like my life,
Stretched out before me, waiting there? he thought)
And saw the sun go melting redly down
Behind bare oaks, and the long shadows, fanlike,
Whirling across the quiet fields, he pondered
On the simplicity, the tranquil beauty, even,
Of morning, twilight, afternoon, or noon,—
So clear by contrast to the nagging jangle
Of his own days! . . . Dry branches caught his feet,
The snapping of them teased his brain to folly,
He clawed at cobwebs that wiped across his cheek,
Inwardly snarled, was maddened, and once more thought,—
Letting his restless eyes rove, seeing nothing,—
His life was a buzzing fly, vainly struggling
To loose weak wings from the glutinous web of fate.
How was it other men could live so simply?
How was it they could love, yet go unscathed,
Walk freely, laugh, and make it all a story?
Or did they lie? — The red sun swelled and sank,
A huge red bubble poised upon the hilltop:
Vermilion clouds flew over it and faded:
The sky, from orange, turned pale green, faint blue;
And the bare boughs of trees, flung up against it,
Frozen and still and black, seemed like great claws.

II

Well, then, if others lied, he too would lie . . .
These faces of the smiling men he knew,
Baker and constable and mayor and hangman,
What did they mean? Were they, as they pretended,
Such gloating misers of illegal riches? . . .
As their imagined faces swam before him,
Ruddy or pale, they seemed to avert their eyes,—
Like those who close their windows to a burglar.
Ah! that was it — they lied. And they, like him,
Walked always warily, for fear of nets,
Ran hard in darkness when they thought none saw them,
And, in their secret chambers, wept for terror.
He laughed at this; because he saw so clearly
On a dark moonless night, along the street,
Half frantic, panting, with his mouth wide open,
The white-faced baker speeding from his shadow.
Yes, they were liars, all,— and he would lie . . .
Although, of course, some things might be accomplished —
Even by him . . . even by him, indeed! —
He picked a stick up, cracked it with his hands,
Smiled at his conscious strength, pressed hard his feet
Into the withered grass, and heard life singing;
Lights came out of the darkened earth like flowers
And swam on the lustrous air . . . they were the lights
Of windows in the village, candles behind them . . .
And as for women . . . but at the thought of women
He thought of Judy only, pale-haired Judy . . .
Judy with wide blue eyes, eternal Judy! . . .
There was a grave for Judy, and he would dig it;
Or had he dug it,— was he digging now,
With every thought? — He paused, with step suspended,

In a cool sort of horror; he seemed to feel
Himself a shovel, used by relentless fate,
To dig that grave . . . was lifted up and thrust,
Lifted again . . . He shivered and then stepped forward,
Seeing the face of Judy eddying down
On a black coiling current into darkness.
This was a kind of madness, and he forbade it.

III

Judy! — Lying beside her in the moonlight
He feigned a sleep, and turned, and through the window
Watched how the crooked moon went slowly up
Among black elm-boughs, driving out the stars.
And here was Judy sleeping so beside him
While fate in him, as in a cup, mixed poison.
Black thoughts, like webs, he softly put around her,
Quietly back and forth. On her white skin,—
The moonlight touched one shoulder, made it dazzle —
He seemed to see these thoughts, like black webs, failing,
Knitting her fast for death . . . And who, above her,
Hung like the bearded spider . . . he, or fate?
And why was she so marked for death at all?
Of course, if he had nerve, as heroes should have,
He'd kill her now,— smother her with a pillow,
Strangle her with his hands, or cut her throat . . .
But thinking this, his lips grew dry, his hands
Weakened, his breath was hurried, he closed his eyes
To shut the hideous room out, known too well,
And all that went with it . . . himself and Judy . . .
How would the baker do it, or the hangman?
Poison? He licked his lips and poured it slowly,

Saw the green bubbles sliding . . . No, not poison . . .
Judy would know, accuse him before she died,
Or what was worse, stare at him, in her writhings,
With new-found horror . . . Darkness closed him in,
No door of light there was, he seemed imprisoned:
Chained and encircled . . . He, himself, was helpless.
All that could help him now was what most bound him —
Fate . . . and fate, as always, seemed just grinning.

The village clock struck suddenly into his musings . . . .
Twelve molten golden plummets of slow sound
Plunged heavily downward in a void of silence,
Leaving a surge of air . . . He saw the tombstones
Glistening in the moonlight, ghostly rows,
And felt, as it were, the earth creep up about him . . .
Was he a shovel in the hands of fate,
Digging a grave? Digging a grave for Judy?
Well, it was strange to think that he had loved her —
Perhaps still loved her — yet desired her buried!
When she caressed him next, or stood on tiptoe
To prim her lips for his, he'd think of this;
It would be hard, he thought, to meet her eyes . . .
The moon, by now, had climbed above the elm-tree,—
Swam freely; through black claws reached after it.
The stars hummed round it still, though at a distance.
Would he be ever as free as the moon was, even?
After a while he slept, and in his sleep
Dreamed of a grave that opened,— without shovels.

IV

Judy in sunlight combed her hair out slowly,
Tossing her small head backwards. Now her elbows

Flashed in the sun; her blue eyes, in the mirror,
Sought for his eyes, and smiled; the streaming hair
Dazzled him. Yet, desiring so to kill her,
And being afraid, his hatred only hardened,
His hands, that dared not hurt her, could not touch.
Did she perceive this? Did some whisper reach her,
Chilling her blood? She smiled, and went on combing,
The smile died slowly, meeting no smile for answer,
The silence deepened, prolonged, seemed fraught with meanings.
If she could know the dream he had dreamed last night,
Of an earthy grave that dug itself beneath her,
And swallowed her without sound — what would she say?
Laugh for a moment, perplexed, and hide her trouble,—
Or think the thing a trifle? — pat his cheek,
Abuse him, mockingly, for sleeping treason?
He watched her elbows moving, watched the comb
Gliding the golden length of hair, and thought
(First with a start, but after with composure)
If she could only know one instant, clearly,
How much he hated her and wished her dead —
Would she not die, or — even — kill herself?
Just here, half laughing, Judy turned towards him
With something on her lips to say: but seeing
A cold glare in his eyes grew suddenly grave
And cried "Why, what's the matter?—" He, surprised,
Guilty, caught with a red knife in his hands,
Lowered his eyes, and laughed and said "Oh, nothing!";
And left her staring, large-eyed, after him.
Even as he left, his guilt had changed to anger.

Yes, there it was — that everlasting net
Falling upon his brain! He could not move

But it was there before him, softly tangling,
Meshing his hands and eyes. He hated Judy,—
The more because she now intruded on him,
Blundered among his poisons . . . His, or fate's?
He raged a while. The sunlight was detested.
Freedom! Who had the thing? This net came softly
On all he thought and did; desires and hatreds,
These were the fevers of too-mortal flesh,
Insuppressible flesh . . . Why love? Why hate? . . .
Or could one play, with skill, a music on them? . . .
No, not if one was (as he was) a coward . . .
He walked on grass, stared at the intricate blades,
Saw all was interwoven. "So my frailties!"
He thought, "are interwoven. I am helpless."
Yet, with a teasing half-smile, he remembered
That though one might not conquer, one might lie.

V

Polly had waited for him by the brook —
Pretending not to. When she saw him coming
She turned her back and sang . . . Confound the girl!
Was she avoiding him, or only teasing?
He stood, half hesitating, looking downward;
Wondered if she had seen him. His flesh quickened,
The blood sang brawling melodies in his brain,
He thought, with lips apart, his chance had come
To do as other men did (if they did)—
Fling prudence to the wind and take his pleasure . . .
The blood sang ribald melodies in his brain.
His coward heart was hammering at his ribs.
The sky was blue and birds were singing in it,

Polly was singing, sunlight flashed on the water,
And he alone seemed sinister under the sky . . .
Would she resent his hump, make fun of him? . . .
Desire was strong in him, and he stepped downward.

Polly (the witch) played devil's music on him;
Teased at the darker currents of his blood
While seeming not to tease. She chattered, simpered,
Narrowed her black eyes on him in dark questions,
Plucked at her dress with lazy fingers, sighed,
And when she saw the half-cowed tiger rising
Behind his eyes, leered sidelong at his hump
(She knew he watched) and froze him to the marrow.
Basking in sunlight, somehow she contrived
To strip her body bare,— to lie before him
In naked loveliness: her clothes were vapour,
Her beauty burned them off, her flesh sang through them,
The white skin flashed before him . . . When, half frantic,
With hearing, seeing, feeling such clear music,
And blind with a sudden violence not his own
He flushed, and caught her hand, and tried to kiss her,
She suddenly laughed. "Now, hunchback, don't be silly!"
She smoothed her hair, looked at him coldly, frowned,—
Then rose and walked away . . . He felt like crawling.

VI

The throbbing music she so played upon him
Grew, in his dream, to a beauty past all bearing!
A bright and baleful light in shafts from heaven
Slanted upon a green hill; trees were shaken,
The leaves flew down upon it and whirled upon it

As if it were a wind; it swept and thrilled him.
There, as he built a wall to keep the sea out,
A mist-white sea that flashed without wave or sound,
She came before him and lifted her hands and laughed,
Naked and fair . . . But just as he leaned to take her
Black webs like rain came ravelling out of the sky,
Fastened upon her, meshed her, bound her helpless,
And whirled her away on air. He woke in horror:
Half doubting if it were Polly after all — ;
Half hoping, half believing, it might be Judy.

VII

Waking from this his life seemed somehow changed! . . .
His body was light; the air semed singing about him,
Moonlight roared through the elm-trees like a river,
The trees seemed ready to walk; even the houses
Seemed only to pause on earth for a moment, ready
To tilt on the stellar air and soar away.
Bewitched again! this time by Polly Prim.
He desired to dance, and sat up straight in bed
With gnomes and elves cavorting in his brain;
And then he remembered how absurd he was,
And felt his hump, and the stiffness of his legs.
Well,— whatever the outcome,— this was music.—
Spring with a million green leaves glistened in him:
His hate of Judy rose in a smoke of laughter . . .
Whether she lived or died he could avoid her —
Why waste his thoughts upon her? Love was better.
And was it sure the girl was laughing at him?
Had he, in fact, seemed so ridiculous?
One instant, he was hot with a throbbed confusion,

His hands were tight. He heard her laughing coldly,
Saw the clear devilish eyes, and felt like crawling . . .
With a slight turn and shrug, though, these reflections
Vanished . . . He felt instead her cool skin touch him,
And saw himself, the next time at the inn,
Winking, slapping his knee, and confiding slyly
To the baker or the hangman how he, Punch,
(Despite his ugliness — so all too obvious!)
Had half seduced that Polly Prim already,—
Boldly touched her knee with his hand, and kissed her,—
In fact, could have the rest of her for the asking! . . .
Warm preludes started murmurings in his brain.

VIII

"No doubt" (he thought) "this web is still around me;
But Polly weaves it now, and so it glistens,
It sings about me, I can dance within it . . . "
He put his hands out, thinking he might feel it
Shimmering on the air. If net this was
It was a pleasant net, and well worth having.
Wherever it touched it burned . . . He walked within it,
Remembering, with a bland astonishment,
How he had railed so, railed at hell and heaven,
For spreading snares for him. . . . And here was Polly!
Polly, with sombre hair,— and pale hands lifted
To play such music on him! — Feeling this,
(As, swimming, one might feel the cool of water
In streaks and whorls translucent flowing round him,
With a slight seethe of bubbles,) he walked gaily,
Forgetting much. Blue days like flowers gigantic
Opened above his head, flashed far above him,

Were slowly closed. Birds hung suspended in them,
Burned in the blue, revolved, or lazily sailed,
Glided away, were lost. Faint voices thrilled him
Seeming to echo voices once familiar
Now half-forgotten, vague, and strange in meaning . . .
The moon itself,—(blown like a silver bubble
In the blue air)— seemed but an idle symbol
Of time and fate, as idle. It passed slowly,
Merged in a foam of cloud, was softly lost . . .
Bound as a victim in such web of music,
Spun to his end in skeins of sound like fire—
This fate was sweet! It hardly seemed like fate . . .
Thinking these things, and always seeing Polly
Dancing before him in a clear depth of sunlight
(Uncaptured yet — he shivered —) he kissed Judy
And touched her arm, and smiled, and never winced . . .
He had forgotten, now, his dream of shovels.

IX

One morning, meeting Judy on the stairway,
He noticed,— for the first time,— something strange:
She eyed him palely, raised one hand, seemed shrinking
Faintly upon herself to let him pass . . .
Some threat there was in this — he went more slowly,
Probing that look . . . What was the woman thinking? . . .
It was as if, in some way, death were in her
And looked out through her eyes. It was as if
He had glanced in through the open door of a tomb
And seen cold shadow there . . . Was Judy planning
The death which he himself, in thought, had hoped for?
Terror came down upon him, his feet were heavy,

The sunlight darkened, he suddenly saw his fate
(That fate which he himself had set in motion!)
Moving with sinister speed, looming above him,
Roaring among his trees! — His hands fell weak,
His cowardly eyes found nothing they could look at,
He sat among withered leaves . . . Judy was dying!
Judy was killing herself! Judy was dead!
The leaves flew round his feet, dust whirled among them,
The sun went over the sky, and swelled and sank,
The hours were struck, all things went on, resistless,
And he was whirled along with them . . . Well, truly,
Had he desired her dead, or hinted at it? . . .
Had he been murderous, even in words? . . .
Had he looked at her with a look of hatred? . . .
When he found heart at length, and slowly limped
Across grey fields, and saw the house, it seemed
Quietly changed. It seemed to keep a secret.
Its secret lay on the kitchen floor, in darkness.
He held a light above her, stared, was speechless.
Judy had taken poison and was dead.

X

Polly, upon his anguished summons, came
To dress his Judy, lay her out in satin,
And spend the night. He sat, and heard her moving,
Moving to and fro in the room above him,
Pulling the curtains down, opening drawers:
Moving, when she remembered to, on tiptoe . . .
What was she doing, all this time, up there? . . .
He wished the floor were glass, that he might see her . . .
And Judy lying there! He thought of Polly,

Living — and Judy, dead. This living body,
Turning there in the presence of the dead,
Bending above it, touching it with warm hands,
Rising to move away, with clear dark eyes —
Its beauty dazzled him; his flesh was quickened,
The blood sang teasing melodies in his brain,
Provoked a silent cry. Where was he drifting?
Where was he — rather — being swept, and helpless?
A gesture of struggle passed like a ghost before him,
He sank back weakly, knowing his efforts useless;
And hearing the soft steps ring once more above him
Surrendered to their music. Flares of pain
Rose in his heart, but through the pain that music
Steadily sang . . . He knew himself most ugly,
And closed his eyes for a moment not to see it.
Red-faced, lascivious, hump-backed, and a coward!
Where the strings pulled, he moved. He was a puppet.

When all was still — (still pond and no more moving! —
The phrase flew into his mind and laughed at him)
He went upstairs to bed; and the dread thing happened.
Faint fragrance stirred on the quiet air. At first
He heard no sound. He found his door and opened,
And stood there, silent. And as he stood there, trembling,
(Or was he shivering? for the air was cool)
Thinking how gross he was, how red and ugly,
And wondering if he dared to do this thing,—
With Judy lying dead, there, in her room;
Or if he had the courage; well, just then,
Polly came into the hall, and smiled at him,
Combing her hair . . . She combed her hair and smiled,
Lazily smiled, tilting her dark head backward,
Bending her smooth white arms. He stood transfixed . . .

Slow savage chords throbbed in his brain: his mouth
Too dry for speech, his feet too weak for moving . . .
"What is it?" Polly asked. His smile was foolish.
He did not know what answer was intended,—
Whether she knew what music clashed within him,
Pretending not to hear it (hearing perhaps
The same great cymbals in her own dark veins)
Or whether, if she knew, she only teased him,—
And hearing him confess, would feign a horror! . . .
He was afraid . . . "Judy is dead" (he thought)
"I am alone . . ." he raised his hands to his eyes,
Pretending a wave of grief. Polly, at this,
Came to him quickly, stood before him, touched him . . .
"Now don't be foolish!"— He looked up, saw her smile,
(That slow soft smile again! What did it mean?)
And as he looked she took a slight step backward . . .
Silence came down upon them. He felt a net
Falling between them. He desired to move, to break it,
To touch her warm white body that sang before him,
But could not stir. If he could lift his hand —
What could prevent his touching her arms, her hair,
Her round white throat? . . . Then, as the silence deepened,
Smiling a little again, she walked back slowly,
Paused at her doorway — or seemed to pause — one instant,
To gleam through narrowed eyelids darkly at him,—
And softly closed her door. . . . What did she mean? . . .
Should he go after her — knock at the d[illegible] . .
The loud blood hammered and swelled a[illegible] his temples,
Desire and fear confused him. He stood helpless.
He entered his room, sank wearily on his bed,
Stared through the window at a night of starlight
And cursed his fate; and all about was silence. . . .

Judy herself was not more dead than he.

XI

"Is this the house where Judy lived?"
"Yes,— long ago."
"The house where Judy lived and died?"
"Ah! . . . long ago." . . .
He lay in the dark. Why did this idiot jingle
Keep running in his head? What did it mean?
Had he grown old already? — He clutched the pillow
And looked out through the pale blue square of window
Between black twisted branches at the stars.
Yes. There they were, just as they were before,
Silver and blue and green and twinkling crimson,
Yellow and white . . . they danced and laughed and trembled,
Pirouetted and sang, yet never moved.
And there was Judy, dead, in a darkened room,
Never to comb her hair again, or, laughing
Run down the stairs, or snap the stems of violets. . . .
And here was he, hump-backed and red and bestial,
Driving her through his thoughts; and there was Polly
Sleeping,— or lying awake, perhaps, to smile!
He watched a thin bough, thrust against his window,
Dipping upon the air against the stars
As if it caught them and let them go again . . .
It was a claw. Fate itself was a claw.
His life was full of claws. He was a shovel
Held in such claws . . . and made to dig a grave,
A grave for Judy. And there was Judy waiting . . .
Or was it himself had died and would be buried? . . .
The earth piled up above him, he could not breathe.

"Is this the house where Judy lived?"
"Yes — long ago."

"The house where Judy lived and died?"
"Ah! — long ago."

XII

Polly, he thought, was lying in her room
Stretched out upon the white bed, straight and slender;
Her long dark hair spread out upon the pillow.
Perhaps she lay awake still, gazing vaguely
Down that white length, and through the tall blue window
At these same stars . . . perhaps she turned her head
And lazily closed her eyes, to shut them out . . .
These thoughts played through his mind like a melody,—
Glissandos, shimmering downward from the treble
Sharply to crash among deep chords of passion . . .
And through these tones the thought of Judy came
Like freezing silence . . . Judy! . . . Judy! . . . Judy! . . .
What did the word mean? What had it ever stood for? . . .
Judy lying alone in a darkened room,
Her eyelids closed, her hands upon her breast!
If she could rise, and live again,— he'd hate her . . .
But dead? . . . He closed his eyes, and in the darkness
That roiled his mind ran fast through a wind of voices . . .
If he had killed her it had been unwitting.

XIII

Unravelling in his dream from vague beginnings,
Like a melody evolved from muttered tunings,
These things grew strange in size. Against a wall
Quivering in a light's unsteady yellow,
A shadow fell; and Polly stood before him
Naked and fair. He moved and caught and kissed her,

She half averted her face, she strained away,
Delirium fused his veins. Then down the stairs,
Bringing a sort of darkness as they came,
He heard the steps of Judy ring,— each step
Spreading a darkness and reverberating.
Polly was gone. He trembled, he desired to hide,
He stood by the wall. . . . When Judy came at last,
Standing before him suddenly,— warm and young,—
He saw that she was pregnant; and remorse
Stifled his heart. Ashamed and shy and awkward
He hesitated towards her, touched her, kissed her,
Said (what he had not said so long) "I love you! "—;
Then leaned against the wall and cried like a child.
She looked at him surprised,— and tenderly,—
And slowly walked away.

Later, his dream
(But after he had waked and stared in anguish
At the dark ceiling above him, vaguely white)
Brought him a hidden sound of Polly's laughter,
The clear notes blown from nowhere. There he seemed
To run from some one, some one with a knife —
The constable? — he did not turn to see,
But ran; till suddenly, thinking he was safe,
He saw the man before him in a chair
With his back turned; and stabbed him, then, and killed him . . .
As the man moved his head to look, he woke.

XIV

He walked in a rain to see his Judy buried.
The sky was filled with the slanting spears of rain,

Grey spears of rain. Over the tops of trees
Whistled the wind-torn clouds. The ruts were gleaming,
Puddles were ringed and rippled. At the churchyard
They found the grave already dug, raw earth
Heaped up beside it, pitted and dark with rain.
This was the last injustice! This was monstrous.
They lowered the coffin awkwardly into the grave,
On the bare resonant boards that hid his Judy
The rain drummed monotones, wet earth was shovelled;
And suddenly, able to bear the thing no longer,
He turned his back, stared at the rain-lashed grass,
And saw how cruel was life. The church-bell tolled,
The tones were whirled away as soon as struck,
Tumbled upon the wind, and lost in rain,
Or beaten down to the ground. Among worn grass-blades
Rain-bubbles winked and ran with delicate seething,
Bare trees whipped in the wind . . . the day was madness.

Dusk fell. He crossed the fields alone. His house
Looked old and cold and small and time-forgotten.
"Is this the house where Judy lived?"
"Yes,— long ago. . . ."
"The house where Judy lived and died?"
"Ah! — long ago."

He thrust the door, stood in the silent hallway,
And heard no sound save whir and splash of rain
And tick of clocks; alone and loud and foolish
In the slow mouldering and decay of time.

XV

Through the tall window, on the brown curve of the hill,
He watched pale silvery arrows of rain descending;

Slow long arpeggios thrilled and chimed in his heart.
The soft drops brushed on the window and were muted.
The grey-white sky above him whirled with rain.
"Well, then . . . if Polly refused me . . . Judy tricked
me . . .
But *did* they now,— or did I misinterpret? . . .
No! I should wrong myself if I should think so . . .
Have I not half seduced the girl already?
Did I not . . . kill the other? "— Thinking this
He seemed to feel that horrible net once more,
But thrust it harshly aside. "No, I am free:
No man or law or fate can change my purpose,
No god defeat my will! If, on that hillside,
Old Nick himself, and Doctor Faustus with him,
Should spread the world before me, for my soul —
Setting before me Venus with bright hair,
Towers of silver, walls inlaid with sapphires,—
I should refuse. No fate shall take my soul! . . .
And where is she so proud, who, to my cunning,
Shall not surrender her crown, her heart, and all? . . ."
He was tired, he bowed his head; and in a dream
The Queen of Sheba smiled on a throne before him,
A far faint clashing of music reached his ears,
A ghostly pageant of crimson shimmered and smouldered
And swayingly died away. . . . And death itself
Went dwindling into the grey rain, only pausing
At the sky's edge to lift one menacing arm . . .
Or was it only a gaunt tree, silhouetted,
Flinging a long black branch out, one great claw? . . .
. . . . . .
The dark dream spread before him, like a valley
Made strange with music. Birds flew upward from it;
Far down flashed moving lights. He closed his eyes

And smiled, and took one step, and then another;
And groping raised his hands. . . . The air was warm.

This was the valley of forgetfulness
Where painful thoughts and frustrate deeds would fade . . .
He saw an orange moon rise, strangely large,
Above soft trees. Among the unbroken vineyards
Maenads came out to dance, he heard them singing,
The leaves swished back behind them, laughter descended . . .
This was the valley of love and lawlessness;
Where thirst was quenched, with no satiety,
And flesh and stream and tree were all immortal.
Cymbals softly clashed in the moonlit forest
Far down before him, the undulant air was fragrant
With flight of ghostly roses; out of the silence, voices
Rose faint and clear. . . . He slowly descended the hill.

HE IMAGINES THAT HIS PUPPET HAS A DARK DREAM AND HEARS VOICES

First Voice

Pave the sky with stars for Punch!
And snare in flowers a moon for him
With white rose-trees and apple trees
And cherubim and seraphim!

Second Voice

Look! he comes! how tall he is!
A crown of fire is on his head;
The sky unrolls before his feet,
Green mountains fear his tread.

The meteors now like dolphins dive
Into the white wave of the sky,
Blue moons and stars around him sing
And suns triumphant cry!

Third Voice

Build a house of gold for Punch,
Of gold without and silk within,
With floors of glass, and let there be
For ever there a silver din

Of music's many instruments
In slow and low amazement heard:
In every window-niche a cage,
In every cage a singing-bird.

Build it in a kingdom far;
In a forest green and deep;
Where no tears nor sorrows are,
But only song and sleep.

There to the noise of wind in trees
And many rivers winding down,
Let him forget the cares of earth
And nod a kingly crown!

FOURTH VOICE

Like a tower of brass is Punch,
And great and stately is his pace;
There is no other as tall as he,—
None with so fair a face.

Fall down, fall down, you kings of men,
Fall down before him! This is he
For whom the moon pursues her ghost
And demons bend the knee.

Woe unto you, you miscreants
Who dare the lightnings of his eyes!
His hand, how strong! His wrath, how just!
His brow, how white and wise!

FIFTH VOICE

Solomon, clown, put by your crown,
And Judas, break your tree:
Seal up your tomb and burn your cross,
Jesus of Galilee!

For here walks one who makes you seem
But atoms that creep in grass;
You are the pageant of his dream,
And he will bid you pass.

Let Rome go over the earth in gold
With trumpets harshly blown!
For here comes one whose splendour burns
More gloriously, alone.

Heliogabalus, laugh your last!
Queen Sappho, lie you down!
Punch the immortal shakes the seas
And takes the sun for crown.

SIXTH VOICE

Sheba, now let down your hair,
And play upon it with your hands,
While girls from Tal and Mozambique
Parade before in sarabands,—

Play him songs inaudible
With white hands braceleted and slim,
Or shake your hair and let it fall
And softly darken him.

Cling to him, while cymbals far
Are sweetly smitten in the dusk,
And maenads, under a haughty star,
Break the white rose for its musk:

Cling to him, and with your lips
Feed his heart on crumbs of fire

That shall, perpetually, delight,
But never slay desire!

Seventh Voice

Open a window on the world
With all its sorrow, and then
When he has heard that sound a space,
Close it fast again. . . .

Sweet will it be, lapped round with ease
And music-troubled air,
To hear for a moment on the wind
A sound of far despair:

And then, to turn to lights again,
And fingers soft on strings,
While Sheba slips her bracelets off
And spreads her arms and sings. . . .

Sweet will it be, to hear far off
That gusty sound of pain,
And to remember, far away,
A world of death and rain:

And then, to close the window fast,
And laugh, and clap soft hands,
While girls from Tal and Mozambique
Parade in sarabands. . . .

Close now the window! Close it well! . . .
That slow lament of pain
Was but the dissonance that makes
Dull music sweet again.

Eighth Voice

Death, you will wear a chain of gold,
And wreaths of roses white and red,
And nightlong will you dance for him
With garlands on your head.

Bring a cup and pour him wine,
And dance for him; for this is he
Who plays a jocund tune for you
But will not set you free.

Or go with thongs to scourge the world
And lay it waste; and then come back
To sorrow before him in a cage
And garb yourself in black.

A cage of gold he keeps for you! . . .
There he will watch you dance,
And fill his cup, immortally,
And laugh at circumstance.

Ninth Voice

There is a fountain in a wood
Where wavering lies a moon:
It plays to the slowly falling leaves
A sleepy tune.

. . . The peach-trees lean upon a wall
Of gold and ivory:
The peacock spreads his tail, the leaves
Fall silently. . . .

There, amid silken sounds and wine
And music idly broken,
The drowsy god observes his world
With no word spoken.

Arcturus, rise! Orion, fall! . . .
The white-winged stars obey . . .
Or else he greets his Fellow-God;
And there, in the dusk, they play

A game of chess with stars for pawns
And a silver moon for queen:
Immeasurable as clouds above
A chess-board world they lean,

And thrust their hands amid their beards,
And utter words profound
That shake the star-swung firmament
With a fateful sound! . . .

. . . The peach-trees lean upon a wall
Of gold and ivory;
The peacock spreads his tail; the leaves
Fall silently. . . .

EPILOGUE

MOUNTEBANK FEELS THE STRINGS AT HIS HEART

In the blue twilight the puller of strings, half-tenderly
Tumbling his puppets away,— Punch, Judy, and Polly,—
Into the darkness again; Jack Ketch and Faustus,
Solomon, crowned with a crown of tinsel and silver,
Sheba with small hands lifted; Judas Iscariot
With a noose of frayed thin silk about his neck,
And the Devil himself in scarlet with white eyes leering,—
Tumbling them into their box, the cords relaxed,
The small world darkened, whereupon they danced and squeaked,—
Leaving them there in the dusk pell-mell together;
And turning away, at last, to look from a window
At a darker and greater world, ring beyond ring
Of houses and trees and stars, sky upon sky,
Space beyond silent space of clouds and planets:

Suddenly, there, as he stood at the darkening window
Watching the glimmer of uncounted worlds in the twilight,
A world so vast, so piercingly chorded with beauty,
Blown and glowing in the long-drawn wind of time,—
He saw himself,— though a god,— the puppet of gods;
Revolving in antics the dream of a greater dreamer;
Flung up from a sea of chaos one futile instant,
To look on a welter of water whirling with crimson;
And then, in an instant, drawn back once more into chaos.

. . . Was it enough, to remember that in that instant
He had cried out in a cry of rapture and anguish? . . .

Was it enough to believe,— if he could believe it! —
That the faint voice crying abruptly and strangely its anguish
Was the voice of himself? . . . Or only the voice of the gods? . . .
Was he no better than Judy, or Polly,— or Punch,
Capering about his cage of twittering dreams? . . .

Strange! As he looked from the height of the darkened window
At the glimmer of immortal worlds below and above,
Star beyond star, house beyond house,— soul beyond soul? —
He imagined that Judy, there in the box behind him,
Stirred her fellows aside and rose in the darkness
And quavered to him . . . "Listen! you puller of strings!
Do you think it just to call me into existence,—
To give me a name,— and give me so little beside? . . .
To Polly you give her laughter, to Punch his illusions,—
To me you give nothing but death!"

She wept after this,
Resting her small white elbows there on the box-edge,
And waited in silence. He, meanwhile, not turning towards her,
But resting, like her, his arms on the sill of the window,
Watched the dark world.

"How shall I answer you, Judy? . . .
It is true you have little but sorrow and death at my hands —
It is true you seem hardly a shadow for Polly and Punch,—
And this I regret! You step for a moment from darkness
Turning, bewildered, your face in a twinkle of lamplight,
Lift sharply your hand,— and vanish once more, and for ever.
But Judy,— how else could I find you,— how even console you?

I too am a puppet. And as you are a symbol for me
(As Punch is, and Sheba — bright symbols of intricate meanings,
Atoms of soul — who move, and are moved by, me —)
So I am a symbol, a puppet drawn out upon strings,
Helpless, well-coloured, with a fixed and unchanging expression
(As though one said 'heartache' or 'laughter'!) of some one who leans
Above me, as I above you. . . . And even this Some one,—
Who knows what compulsion he suffers, what hands out of darkness
Play sharp chords upon him! . . . Who knows if those hands are not ours! . . .

"Look then at my mind: this tiny old stage, dimly lighted,
Whereon,— and without my permission,— you symbols parade,
Saying and meaning such things! You, now, with your death,
Crying out into my heart, if for only a moment!
Punch with his devils about him, his terror of darkness!
And Polly there laughing beside him — look now how you walk
On the nerve-strings of all I can know, to delight me, to torture,
To pass in a nightmare of gesture before me, how heedless
Of me,— whom our gods have ordained to exist as your world!
Think, now! I can never escape you. Did you call me a tyrant?
I desire to change you — and cannot! . . . I desire to see you
Under a pear-tree — (we'll say that the tree is in blossom —)
A warm day of sunlight, and laughing,— at nothing whatever! . . .
A green hill's behind you; a cloud like a dome tops the hill;

A poplar tree, like a vain girl, leans over a mirror
Trying on silver, then green, perplexed, but in pleasure;
And you there, alone in the sunlight, watch bees in the pear-tree,
Dipping the leaves; and you laugh — for no reason whatever!
Delightful! One moment, at least, no Punch can disturb you,
No Polly whirl dead leaves about you! You stand there untroubled . . .
Thus, then, I desire to see you, to have you exist
If only an instant; yet down come the shadows between us,
And all they have left me is — Judy, to whom I have given
A name, and so little beside! "

. . . There was silence a moment
And when he turned back expecting, perhaps, to see Judy
Leaning her small white elbows there on the box-edge,—
No, not a sign. The puppets lay huddled together,
Arms over heads, contorted, just where he had dropped them;
Inscrutable, silent, terrific, like those made eternal
Who stare, without thought, at a motionless world without meaning.

THE END

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